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ABSTRACT

This study examined the nature of teacher layoffs and their effects on the role enactment and coping strategies of teachers. Fourteen high school teachers, who were employed in a large urban school district plagued by declining enrollment, were interviewed. Each teacher had been "riffed" (reduction in force) and recalled at least once in the previous 10 years, and most had been laid off and recalled more than once. An analysis of the interviews indicated that four aspects of the riffing experience creating a perception of crisis among the teachers were: (1) the unpredictability of the phenomenon; (2) the arbitrariness and instability; (3) the adaptational demands; and (4) the dehumanization of the situation. Several coping responses were evident in the teachers faced by the crises: (1) active problem-solving; (2) fatalism (acceptance); (3) disinvestment; (4) cognitive and affective responses such as cynicism, distrust, anger, blame, anxiety, and reevaluation; and (5) dysfunctional and denial responses including absenteeism, depression, alcohol consumption, and sleeplessness. (JD)

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Teacher Socialization Through Career Crises

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As individuals move through life, they grow more like others who experience the same kinds of life events, yet also grow to be different in other ways because of the patterns, timing, and uniqueness of certain other experiences; obviously teachers are no exception. Hueltsch and Deutsch (1981) have categorized the influences on behavior as a) normative, age-graded; b) normative, history-graded; and c) non-normative life events. The teacher socialization literature has generally examined teacher development from a more or less normative, age-graded approach, that is, one that sees changes in teachers as a result of increasing experience (age) as a teacher, c.f. the work of Hall, Burden, Cohen, Ryan, Newman.

For a more complete picture of teacher development, we must now incorporate an understanding of the other two kinds of life influences--history and non-normative. The purpose of the study reported here was to examine the nature of certain events, specifically teacher lay- offs, and their effects on the role enactment and coping strategies of teachers. Although these events were produced by factors in the schools in the 1970's, and were therefore history-related, the events did not produce crises for all teachers and were therefore better classified as non-normative. We will leave it to future researchers to better explore the normative, history-graded influences on teachers.

Though we can all readily accept the notion that crises in a teacher's life affect the ability to carry out the various career and personal life roles, there has been scant attention to the actual or perceived effects of such crises on the day to day teaching of those who've endured lengthy strikes, lawsuits, charges of misconduct, or, of interest here, lay off or riffing (Reduction in Force). During the ten or so years that declining enrollment plagued the public schools, and lay offs resulted, educators wrote about the legal and administrative ramifications of riffing, but the effects of this career crisis on the personal and professional lives of the teachers was virtually unexplored. This was true in spite of the fact that many riffed teachers eventually returned to the classroom where they now continue to serve as mediators of the curriculum to countless children and adolescents.

Jennings (1967), who looked at executive career crises, has claimed that their career crises, such as lay off and firing, are basically "crises of the self" and draw responses which are often dysfunctional. They may temporarily or permanently affect not only the individual's work, but also his/her view of self and subsequent maintenance of a satisfying life. We had reason to believe that teachers are

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likely to experience layoff as dramatically as do executives in crisis, and to respond with a similar array of behaviors. So we designed this study to answer the following questions about the non-normative life event of riffing for teachers:
1. What are the situational variables in riffing that contribute to its definition as a crisis by the teachers?
2. What are the short term and long term coping responses called on by teachers in crisis?
3. What mediating variables are involved in the more or less successful coping of the teachers?
4. What are the long and short term effects on their teaching as perceived by the teachers themselves?

Method

Data source. To answer the questions posed above, fourteen high school teachers, who were employed in a large urban school district plagued by declining enrollment, were interviewed. Each teacher had been riffed and recalled at least once in the previous ten years, and most had been riffed and recalled more than once. The teachers were selected to include both sexes, minority and majority teachers, and teachers from a variety of content areas. The interviews lasted about one hour and included responses to a series of sixteen questions about their personal experiences and their perceptions of the effects of riffing on themselves and on others they knew.

Analysis. Content analysis of the fourteen interviews was then carried out by the two researchers, working independently. The researchers used a constant comparative approach in which the data were critically reviewed for similar and different elements between interviews. Findings were then compared and the results were related to current literature, mostly from counseling psychology, on stress and coping. The results were then prepared for presentation with illustrative quotations from the interviews to support points within the report.

Findings

Findings based on the interview analysis can be grouped into four primary categories: situational variables or stressors; coping responses; mediating variables, and perceived behavioral outcomes. We can look at each of these using quotations from the teachers' interviews to illustrate.

Situational Variables/Stressors

Four aspects of the riffing experience created a perception of crisis among the teachers. They were a) the unpredictability of the phenomenon, b) the arbitrariness and instability, c) the adaptational demands, and d) the dehumanization of the situations. These four variables are, of course, overlapping, but together they made a situation that the teachers all described as traumatic. Though they might begin the interviews saying that the riffing had been no big deal, before few minutes had passed, they were expressing a wide array of negative emotions that seemed to

more faithfully reveal their perceptions of the experience.

Just like natural disasters, the riffing was seen as unpredictable, especially in the early years when the teachers had had no experience with it. In her studies of adults faced with transitions, Nancy Schlossberg (1981) pointed out that "perhaps the greatest degree of stress and negative affect is connectd with uncertainty". In the rif situations, teachers could not be sure that they were going to be riffed, and then if they were, they did not know whether they'd be called back, where they might be assigned, or what they might be teaching. High school teachers could be called to junior high positions and vice versa; science teachers could move to remedial mathematics programs. They might be notified of recall in July, or they might be called back the day classes started, or well into the school year. Long range planning for teaching or personal life was utterly impossible because of the unpredictability of the job.

The teachers perceived a kind of arbitrariness about the whole process of riffing. Because they were not privy to the details of the process, and perhaps because there was a considerable amount of manipulation involved, they believed there was a lack of fairness, or at least inconsistency in application of the district policy. The over-riffing followed by recall that seemed to be a yearly occurence seemed capricious--the result of incompetent, confused or deliberatly malicious administrators playing games. One teacher, who left the district, spoke for many others when he said:

> There was no consideration of the quality of my teaching; no consideration of the fact that I was knocking myself out. It was strictly a matter of numbers.

The anger about arbitrariness was closely linked with a sense of the dehumanization of the whole process. Said one teacher: You feel very much like they can turn around and just throw you away." Teachers were likened to numbers, interchangeable parts, old toys, used cars--things, rather than human beings. The experience of riffing as arbitrary and dehumanizing ties into the loss of control associated with an external source of change. Schlossberg (1984) hypothesized that individuals have more difficulty assimilating transitions that are forced by other people or circumstances.

Finally the adaptational demands on the teachers were great. One representative teacher said:

> I was called back to work in this other school. It was a terrible teaching experience. I was taken from a job in which I had been doing extremely well --doing the things that I do best--and put into a situation where I was having to do a tremndous amount of remediation for which I had not been trained.

The teachers had to try to plan for both getting and not getting a teaching job, for having and not having money. They lacked territoral consistency, so had to literally pack up and move out each spring, then move in somewhere else in

autumn. Thus, the image of teacher as "migrant worker" emerges in stark contrast to the expectations of teaching as a stable profession. According to Thoits' review of the stress literature (1983), the dimensions of undesirability, uncontrollability, unpredictability, event magnitude, and time clustering have the most impact on psychological disturbance. Given the collection of situational stressors experienced by riffed teachers, it is clear that riffing qualifies as a crisis-provoking event with potentially severe psychological outcomes.

Coping Responses

Several coping responses were used by the teachers when faced with the crises they perceived. Coping responses are, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984):

> The constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person

Those used by the teachers included active problem-solving; fatalism (acceptance); disinvestment; cognitive and affective responses such as cynicism, distrust, anger and blame, anxiety, reevaluation; and dysfunctional and denial responses including absenteeism, depression, alcohol consumption, and sleeplessness.

All of the teachers engaged in active problem solving as they responded to the crisis they perceived. For some, this meant seeking jobs outside teaching. After the first rif, one teacher began to plan to open a private school (and has since done so, with great success), another decided to return to graduate school, another explored establishing a real estate business. Though many looked for other job opportunities, some focused their active efforts on gathering information about the progress of recall and their changing chances, working the system, or joining with others for support. Said one:

> I went through that summer not knowing what was going to happen...I haunted the association office. I haunted the personnel office....I set up a group...and we got together about every 5 or 6 days, had coffee and generally talked things out.

Such problem-solving strategies are generally seen to be a critical component of one's coping repertoire. However, as Brammer and Abrego (1981) pointed out:

> If persons believe they are powerless to respond effectively to change, they are not likely to attempt a pro-active response. It is more likely that they will adopt a fatalistic "what's the use" stand.

After a time, many of the teachers began to be more fatalistic about the riffing. They began to expect the worst each year (the rif), but also assume that they would probably be rehired too. They became more passive. Reminiscent of Seligman's theory of learned helplessness (1975), the frequent experience of a lack of contingency between how well they did their jobs and their continued employment produced a

generalized attitude of helplessness and resignation.

This fatalism was accompanied by a disinvestment--a pulling back from commitment to the district and the work. The teachers reported spending less time, arriving later, leaving earlier, taking more sick days, not doing the extras, treating the job as a "paycheck". One frequently riffed woman said:

> So you make no long range plans for what you're going to do in that school the following year to improve the quality of your program or your classsroom setting.

A male colleague said:

> I was upset that I had--at myself, for believing that I was going to be able to go on and have faith in the District. I said, "Never again. I'm not going to put myself in that position again"...It was too much of a burn. It really hurt.

The loss of a job, even temporarily, can also be accompanied by the perception of loss of what this job represents, including significant values, an important role, and self-identity. Brammer and Abrego (1981) concluded:

> When these pyschological supports are lost, a decline in self-esteem is experienced. Esteem sometimes is lowered further by anger toward the person or event that is perceived as responsible for the life change.

Cynicism, distrust, anger, blame and anxiety were all expressed by the teachers. One talked about becoming a "professional riffee" who was hardened to the "ins and outs" of the game. Another became suspicious of his administrator thinking that his riffing was because "the principal had something against me, but nothing he would ever say or put into writing." Many expressed anger much like this teacher:

> Angry isn't the word! There were times I was so angry I just wanted to break things and tear things up. But I'm too controlled, so I don't do those things"

Another teacher saw herself as having been "manic-depressive" and as having no control over her emotions.

The riffed teachers were forced into a re-evaluation of themselves as teachers. Was it really just seniority operating, or were they, perhaps, just not good enough for someone to want to keep? Was teaching what they really wanted to do? Was it worth all this pain, this trauma?

An array of dysfunctional responses were reported by the teachers, not only from themselves, but also from their many riffed colleagues. The most severe responses included suicide attempts, increased alcohol consumption, obsessive gambling. Bouts of depression were reported by many, like this teacher who explained:

> There would be days on end that I'd go home from work and all I could do was sit, read, or look out the window. It didn't have anything to do with my wife and child. It was just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Not surprisingly, difficulties in relationships with spouses and companions were common, leading with considerable frequency to divorces and breakups. The teacher just above,

went on to say:

> This impotence, this inability to handle--to control--those factors in my environment that were causing such tremendous stress began to tear at our marriage...and we're now separated.

Milder dysfunctional responses included sleeplessness, weight loss, and general withdrawal. One teacher concluded: "I saw an awful lot of frail people just destroyed...the walking wounded."

Mediating Variables

Through all of this trauma, several mediating variables seemed to intervene to affect the nature of the individual coping responses. The teachers differed, for example, on their cognitive appraisal of the situation and of their likelihood of being re-hired. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined cognitive appraisal as an evaluative process that intervenes between the encounter with an event and an individual's response. Primary appraisal consists of the judgment that an encounter is irrelevant, benign, or stressful, which is further broken down into three forms: harm/loss, threat, and/or challenge. Secondary appraisal is a judgment concerning what an individual is capable of doing and out to do in the situation.

While all the teachers appraised riffing as a stressful event, there were differences in how harmful, threatening, or challenging the situation was assessed to be. Moreover, individuals varied in appraisal of their own ability to respond effectively to riffing. Some seemed just generally more optimistic, with a greater belief in their ability to affect the outcome of this very negative situation. On the other hand, there were those who reported a sense of helplessness and pessimism. Some trusted in their ability to get a different job, while others weren't at all certain that they could do anything but teach.

Closely related to cognitive appraisal of the situation was the variable of attitude. Characteristics of "good copers" have been shown to include attitudes of optimism and resilience, identified as a "sense of coherence" by Antonovsky (1979) and as "hardiness" by Kobasa (1982). Most stress researchers agree that certain attitudinal characteristics, such as commitment, function as a resistance resource in encounters with stressful life events. Exemplifying this notion, one often-riffed teacher explained that she was just to stubborn to leave, and she could roll with the punches. On the other hand, one teacher who left was simply not going to be kicked around, "not going to take this any more", further:

> I'm a very pro-active person. I don't want to wait and have things happen to me. I want to be in charge of doing them myself. I want to make things happen.

Support from others also appeared to be a mediating variable in the coping of the teachers. A substantial convergence in research findings indicates that perceived

social support functions as an extremely valuable coping resource (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Support from family, administrators, students, continuing teachers, and other riffed teachers varied greatly. Though students were reported to be sympathetic to most of the teachers, they were also powerless to change the situation. Nevertheless, knowing that the students were behind them was of great importance according to most:

> From the kids--petitions, the kids wrote petitions; they wrote letters. Kids would come up and talk to you. "You're the most fun. I've learned the most from you." They were a very supportive group.

The general lack of support from continuing teachers was painful to many of the interviewed teachers, but the quality of support of family members seemed more important.

Certainly the availability of back up resources, was important in the teacher's assessment of the situations they were in. In his description of generalized resistance resources, Antonovsky (1979) included "artifactual-material" or monetary resources as having undeniable value for coping with stress. In confirmation of this, those teachers whose spouses were also working expressed far less concern about financial pressure than those who were the sole source of income. Those who could turn to other kinds of employment were also less pressured. One teacher, for instance, held journeyman cards in carpentry and shipbuilding, another owned a small business. Those who had held other kinds of jobs seemed to express a lesser degree of concern than those who had always been teachers. So,too, did those who were competent to teach many subject areas or were willing to teach unpopular classes. All explained that they really liked teaching and wanted to remain in teaching, then, but some were less bound to it and could remain less frantic.

A fifth mediating variable was the life stage of the individual. The importance of the timing of stressful events in relation to the life cycle has been discussed extensively by Neugarten (1979). She pointed out that whether or not an event produces crisis depends largely on an individual's particular timetable. Teachers at certain life stages reported more effect from the riffing than did others. For example, one teacher explained:

> My daughter was born in May right after I was riffed, so all of a sudden I had two kids and no job.

Another teacher, riffed several times, but by the time of interview apparently "safe" said:

> It would bother me more now if I got riffed because now I have a different obligation--things I didn't have before. For instance, now I have a house...something that now I'm going to worry about....The house is the main thing that would make me panic if I got riffed now.

On the other hand, younger teachers, without financial commitments and families to support could be somewhat more carefree, as this teacher described:

> Well, I remember I was fairly young compared to

everybody else. A lot of people were just devastated--just really wiped out--their careers were shot-- twelve years and now they're riffed...I felt kind of frustrated that first time, but after that I knew that I was just getting into this game, and if I couldn't make it, I'd just do something else.

Behavioral Outcomes

We have looked at the various situational variables that created the perception of crisis in the lives of the teachers, at the various coping responses of the teachers to the crises, and finally at the mediating variables that intervened to affect the teachers responses. Those familiar with the coping literature may see that the work on locus of control is helpful in thinking about the crises of these teachers. In one study of elementary teacher burnout (Spector, 1984), the frequency of burnout was related to a more external locus of control. given the actual loss of control experienced by riffed teachers, incrased burnout and feelings of threat from external sources are likely outcomes. The loss of control over their work lives, at the hands of other people, is a unique kind of control situation, different from, say contracting a disease or experiencing a natural disaster. The ramifications must be explored further.

Related to loss of control is a predictd decrease in self-efficacy and in morale. Self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1982) as the individual's judgment that he or she can successfully perform a given task, is hypothesized to determine whether coping efforts will be initiated and for how long they will be sustained. If teachers' confidence in their ability to remain employed is repeatedly shaken, then we can hypothesize that their self-efficacy in general will be undermined. Similarly, long-term morale, or a sense of well-being, depends on how effective one is in coping across a wide range of encounters. Lazarus and Folkman posited:

> Positive morale must depend on a consistent tendency to appraise encounters as challenges, or to appraise harm and threats as manageable and even productive of growth, and to tolerate negative experiences.

The power of RIF to negatively affect long-term morale is most dramatically evidenced in the behavioral outcomes for the teachers as teacher.

Some behavioral outcomes have already been mentioned in the process of describing the other primary categories, for example, the increased use of sick leave time, the decreased investment of time at the school and in long-term planning. Although the teachers, almost to a person, claimed that the riffing crisis had not affected their behavior in the classroom and had not changed their teaching, they reported that they put less of their personal money into buying materials, and less of their effort into creating bulletin boards and instructional materials.

The teachers who were riffed the greatest number of times also described their gradual unwillingness to make

friends of other faculty members at each school because they knew they'd be torn away in a year. They expressed a growing distrust of "them", the administrators who were seen as responsible for the yearly trauma, a reduced loyalty to "the District", and increasing disgust with their local teachers' association because it appeared either powerless to protect them or partially responsible for the crises.

Their reports to the contrary, it is nearly impossible for an outside observer to agree that teaching was not affected by all of this. While the teachers may, in fact, have been able to continue to relate well to students and offer instruction of some kind to them, the gradually diminishing behaviors described above are critical components of instruction. One need look only as far as the effective schools research and the teacher effectiveness research to see that these teachers were gradually slipping away from actions that add up to quality teaching and subsequent learning gains for students. That they did not recognize this decline should be a matter of concern to us.

Epilogue

The interviews on which this work was based were done in 1984 and 1985. There was no rif in 1984, but there was again in 1985. Once again of the over 200 riffed teachers, the majority was called back. (The spring,1985 layoff was followed by a bitter teacher's strike that Fall --the longest in the history of the school district.) We are given every indication that by 1990 there will be a severe teacher shortage, even in this school district. New teachers will be hired into the district in significant numbers. But we also know that teachers like the survivors interviewed here will be present in large numbers in the teaching ranks. They have experienced a 12 year period of crisis like few teachers, except those who taught during the unpredictable period of the Depression. The teachers of the Depression, however, were all affected, while these teachers, by some accounts the brightest to have entered teaching in several decades, were selectively affected. Those effects are extensive, potentially long-lasting, and almost without question, negative.

We have discovered that the experience of RIF was not only deleterious to the psychological and emotional health of this group of teachers, but also that they were unaware of the detrimental effects their coping response had and continue to have on their students. Ironically, those very behaviors seen by the teachers as appropriate responses to the situation, such as withdrawing and disinvesting, were not seen by them as having an impact on their teaching. Thus, denial emerged as a coping mechanism employed to maintain the teachers' sense of effectiveness, thereby raising serious concerns about the long-term impact on students as well as teachers. If you think we had problems with teacher burnout before, this group, socialized by a decade of crisis, forces us to say, "You ain't seen nothin yet".

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